

THE COVENANT THAT CANNOT BE ALTERED (Gal 3:15-18)

[3:15-18](#) Brothers, I can use only a human analogy. Here is the parallel when a covenant is duly ratified, even if it is only a man's covenant, no one annuls it or adds additional clauses to it. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his seed. It does not say, "and to his seeds," as if it were a case of many, but, "and to his seed," as if it were a case of one, and that one is Christ. This is what I mean, the law which came into being four hundred and thirty years later cannot annul the covenant already ratified by God and thus render the promise inoperative. For, if the inheritance is dependent on law, it is no longer dependent on promise; but it was through promise that God conferred his grace on Abraham.

When we read passages like this and the next one, we have to remember that Paul was a trained Rabbi, an expert in the scholastic methods of the Rabbinic academies. He could, and did, use their methods of argument, which would be completely cogent to a Jew, however difficult it may be for us to understand them.

His aim is to show the superiority of the way of grace over the way of law. He begins by showing that the way of grace is older than the way of law. When Abraham made his venture of faith, God made his great promise to him. That is to say. God's promise was consequent upon an act of faith; the law did not come until the time of Moses, four hundred and thirty years later. But--Paul goes on to argue--once a covenant has been duly ratified, you cannot alter it nor add additional clauses to it. Therefore, the later law cannot alter the earlier way of faith. It was faith which set Abraham right with God; and faith is still the only way for a man to get himself right with God.

The Rabbis were very fond of using arguments which depended on the interpretation of single words; they would erect a whole theology on one word. Paul takes one word in the Abraham story and erects an argument upon it. As the King James Version translates [Gen 17:7-8](#), God says to Abraham, "I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee" and says of his inheritance, "I will give it unto thee and to thy seed after thee." (Seed is more clearly rendered descendant, as the Revised Standard Version has it.) Paul's argument is that seed is used in the singular and not in the plural; and that, therefore, God's promise points not to a great crowd of people but to one single individual; and--argues Paul--the one person in whom the covenant finds its consummation is Jesus Christ. Therefore, the way to peace with God is the way of faith which Abraham took; and we must repeat that way by looking to Jesus Christ in faith.

Again and again Paul comes back to the same point. The problem of human life is to get into a right relationship with God. So long as we are afraid of him, there can be no peace. How are we to achieve this right relationship? Shall it be by a meticulous and even self-torturing obedience to the law, by performing endless deeds and observing every smallest regulation the law lays down? If we take that way we will be forever in default, for man's imperfection can never fully satisfy God's perfection; but if we abandon this hopeless struggle and bring ourselves and our sin to God, his grace opens its arms to us

and we find ourselves at peace with a God who is no longer judge but father. Paul's argument is that this is what happened to Abraham. It was on that basis that God's covenant with Abraham was made; and nothing that came in later can change that covenant any more than anything can alter a will that has already been ratified and signed.

SHUT UP UNDER SIN (Gal 3:19-22)

[3:19-22](#) Why, then, have the law at all? The law was added to the situation to define what transgressions are, until the seed should come, to whom the promise, which still holds good, had been made. That law was enacted by angels and came by means of a mediator. Now there can be no such thing as a mediator of one; and God is one. Is, then, the law contrary to the promises of God? God forbid! If a law which was able to give life had been given, then indeed right relationship with God would have come through the law. But the words of scripture shut up everything under the power of sin, for the very reason that the promise should be given to those who believe through faith in Jesus Christ.

This is one of the most difficult passages Paul ever wrote, so difficult that there are almost three hundred different interpretations of it! Let us begin by remembering that Paul is still seeking to demonstrate the superiority of the way of grace and faith over the way of law. He makes four points about the law.

(i) Why introduce the law at all? It was introduced, as Paul puts it, for the sake of transgressions. What he means is that where there is no law there is no sin. A man cannot be condemned for doing wrong if he did not know that it was wrong. Therefore the function of the law is to define sin. But, while the law can and does define sin, it can do nothing whatever to cure it. It is like a doctor who is an expert in diagnosis but who is helpless to clear up the trouble which he has diagnosed.

(ii) The law was not given direct by God. In the old story in [Exo 20](#) it was given direct to Moses; but in the days of Paul the Rabbis were so impressed by the holiness and the remoteness of God that they believed that it was quite impossible for him to deal direct with men; therefore they introduced the idea that the law was given first to angels and then by the angels to Moses (compare [Ac 7:53](#); [Heb 2:2](#)). Here Paul is using the Rabbinic thoughts of his time. The law is at a double remove from God, given first to angels, and then to a mediator; and the mediator is Moses. Compared with the promise, which was given directly by God, the law is a second-hand thing.

(iii) Now we come to that extraordinarily difficult sentence--"There can be no such thing as a mediator of one; and God is one." What is Paul's thought here? An agreement founded on law always involves two people, the person who gives it and the person who accepts it; and it depends on both sides keeping it. That was the position of those who put their trust in the law. Break the law and the whole agreement was undone. But a promise depends on only one person. The way of grace depends entirely on God; it is his promise. Man can do nothing to alter that. He may sin, but the love and the grace of God stand

unchanged. To Paul it was the weakness of the law that it depended on two persons, the law-giver and the law-keeper; and man had wrecked it. Grace is entirely of God; man can not undo it; and surely it is better to depend on the grace of the unchanging God than on the hopeless efforts of helpless men.

(iv) Is, then, the law antithetic to grace? Logically Paul should answer, "Yes" but, in fact, he answers, "No." He says that scripture has shut up everyone under sin. He is thinking of [Deut 27:26](#) where it is said that everyone who does not conform to the words of the law is cursed. In fact, that means everyone, because no one ever has, or ever will, perfectly keep the law. What, then, is the consequence of the law? It is to drive everyone to seek grace, because it has proved man's helplessness. This is a thought that Paul will soon develop in the next chapter; here he only suggests it. Let a man try to get into a right relationship with God via the law. He will find he cannot do it and will be driven to see that all he can do is to accept the wonderful grace of which Jesus Christ came to tell men. —Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT)